

COLONY PINS HOPES ON WIND POWER

By Karl Puckett

MARTINSDALE COLONY —When he was a kid, Peter Wipf and his father used to feed the cattle each morning from a horse-drawn wagon. Wipf does not have fond memories of working in the biting wind.

"Before we had wind turbines," he said, pausing for effect, "I was anti-wind."

Since 2004, 19 wind turbines have gone up on this Hutterite colony's land about 130 miles south of Great Falls.

More are on the way.

The colony recently agreed to lease the entire 15,000-acre farm to Horizon Wind, a large Texas-based developer that is planning a 300-megawatt wind farm featuring 100 turbines spread over 19,000 acres.

That's enough to make Wipf pro-wind.

"Wind becomes an asset with a wind turbine," he said.

Montana's Hutterite colonies, which are some of the state's biggest landowners, have caught the eye of wind developers scouring the state for the best wind and ideal areas to erect turbines.

"They own some big blocks of land and that makes it attractive to developers," said Jim O'Hara, a Chouteau County commissioner who has worked with Ireland-based wind developer Gaelectric, which has an office in Great Falls.

With individual landowners, developers usually have to piece together different tracts and deal with multiple owners, he said.

Greg Worden of Maine-based RSE said the company is testing wind on the Big Stone Hutterite Colony southeast of Great Falls.

Horizon's Chris Taylor said that company is leasing Martinsdale Colony land in addition to nearby state school trust land for the Martinsdale wind farm project. The company also is nearing completion of an interconnection application with NorthWestern Energy to tie into its transmission system to ship the power.

There's currently just 100 megawatts of transmission capacity available.

"It's really just a matter of finding a way to move the power to market," Taylor said.

The Martinsdale Colony, a Lehrerleut colony, one of two Hutterite branches in the state, formed in 1959.

Since it began to develop its wind resource, the colony has received calls from other colonies seeking advice on wind power development.

The land sits in a wind chute so winds from the southwest or northwest are a sure thing.

"We almost always have a constant wind," Wipf said.

He said he couldn't believe his ears when Two Dot Wind owner Dave Healow called him a few years ago about putting up turbines on his land.

"I thought you would never call," he recalled thinking.

In 2003, 11 turbines capable of producing a combined 715 kilowatts of electricity, went up. Another eight, which produce a total of 2000 kilowatts, were erected last year.

Two Dot sells the power from the 19 turbines on the colony land to NorthWestern Energy. Colony members maintain them.

The colony has had one turbine solely for its own use since Dec. 21, 2003. It puts out 150,000 kilowatts a year, meeting a third of the colony's electricity needs.

Now Horizon has come calling.

"They're offering an excellent deal," Wipf said.

He said other developers approached the colony, but he declined after concluding that he knew more about wind than they did.

Choosing to allow the right company to erect turbines is important because revenue from wind development supplements the colony's dry-land farming operation, easing worries about up-and-down income.

"Snow and moisture is iffy at best," Wipf said. "Wind you can bank on."

The turbines owned by Two Dot were fixed up by members of the colony. The young men performing the work were skeptical at first, noting they had never worked on a wind turbine.

Wipf told them that if they could work on a \$100,000 tractor, they could refurbish a turbine.

"When we were done with them, they were as good as new machines," he said.

As he spoke, huge hay bales provided protection from the wind, which was, as usual, blowing to beat the band.

Standing out in the open, the wind cuts to the bone, as it did almost 50 years ago when Wipf fed the cattle those cold Montana mornings.

Now a warm smile crosses his face when he discusses the new opportunity to use the resource he once despised.

"It begins to be fun," Wipf said.